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## XVIII.—A DEFINITION OF THE PASTORAL IDYLL.

The history of the pastoral is a long history ; perhaps no other manner of writing has exerted so wide an influence or held so deep a fascination. The words *pastoral*, *idyllic*, *Arcadian* still move us ; they surround us with an atmosphere of charm ; they encourage those moments that are unstrenuous ; they recall us to an early and almost outgrown freshness of feeling. Yet, oftentimes, the poets of the Golden Age are regarded as mere literary alchemists by critics who cannot yield themselves to genuine poetic illusion, failing to recognize in that distant world the embodiment of really existent beauty. Pastoral has, in many cases, justly been a word of reproach and ridicule, a synonym for insipid creations, unreal in feeling, affected in style ; but whether good art or bad it has appeared, Proteus-like, in numerous forms. Music, sculpture, and painting have used the pastoral *motif* ; the Good Shepherd has been for twenty centuries, in the Christian church, a tender symbol of Divine Care ; and in literature the pastoral has never really faded away, but has come back again and again with persistent appeal. It seems, therefore, that there must be in it some inherent beauty, some elemental greatness which deserves investigation and acknowledgment.

Criticism of this kind of literature exists in abundance in various languages, for men have, with a warmth that shows indisputably the importance of the subject, addressed themselves to formulation of laws, to discussion of the essential character of the scene, the actors, and the language of the pastoral. Little attempt has been made, however, to differentiate the various kinds of pastoral writing. *Pastoral*, *idyll*, *eclogue*, *bucolic* are used interchangeably for productions that range from exquisite poetry to sustained doggerel. The

fundamental difficulty seems to be in the confusion of form with subject-matter, shape with substance. The most worthy form the pastoral has taken and one which inevitably expresses the spirit of pastoral poetry, is the idyll, and it is in a study of this that we may gain the truest idea of the genuine pastoral impulse. The idyll is also the oldest pastoral form and so affords a more complete sequence for study than the later developments of pastoral romance and pastoral drama.

The origin of the pastoral idyll is to be found in man's undated joy in the external world and in his love of song. During the days when life was nomadic, care of the herds was the chief occupation; so we are to picture our remote forefathers guarding their flocks upon some green hillside and beguiling their idleness by songs which, of necessity, were concerned with the joys and events of their free life. The first descriptions we have of such existence are those in the Bible, especially the *Song of Songs*, which in its passion of love, its concrete imagery, and its dramatic presentation is the prototype of the pastoral idyll. It is in the East that we find our first pastorals and it is from the East that the pastoral extended until it was at home in nearly every language. The first pastoral poet of whom we have historical record was Theocritus, who, living in the presence of a pastoral tradition as characteristic as the epic tradition that we call Homer, listening to songs sung by shepherds in Sicilian pastures, shaped the concrete, enduring beauty of the pastoral idyll. Born in Syracuse about three hundred years before Christ, in an age of sophistication, trained by fashionable masters, Theocritus, nevertheless, responded to the beauty of Sicilian lands with a poetic power fresh and direct. Of his artistic genius the long line of imitators, translators, and critics are the best and most convincing witnesses. He established the idyll as an art form revealing

the charm of the pastoral with a skill unmatched by all later generations. His idylls have a great variety of subject; some picture the life of mowers and of fishermen; others are mythological stories of men and arms; there are enchantments; and, again, there are pictures of those whose duty it is to lead and defend the pasturing herds. It is upon these idylls which deal with the buoyant happiness of the life of herdsmen that we must base our study of the pastoral idyll and make clear the distinction between the idyll proper and the pastoral idyll.

Because the best of the idylls of Theocritus are concerned with the life of herdsmen (*pastores*) many students have come to confuse *idyll* with *pastoral*, and have used the terms interchangeably. This confusion has been further increased by critics who care little for nice distinctions. These men give the word pastoral as wide a signification as possible and let it stand for anything rural and unconventional. The idyll means to them a presentation of life simple, quiet, and serene, as it follows normal law in a realm far from fashion and from fortune, open to all the influences of nature. In thus allowing such breadth of interpretation it is possible to identify pastoral and idyll. But to the scientist such looseness of terms is not permissible in a just appreciation of values. He demands close observation of essential differences and he feels that the pastoral has played too definite a part in the world of literature, that it has had too vivid and too intense an existence to admit of any blurring of conception. The pastoral suggests to the student of literature definite imagery, — pictures of those happy guardians of the herd whose task gives them leisure for song, whose occupation is of a sort that leads to meditation on the beauty of the visible world, and stimulates the poetic spirit.

Having thus defined the limits of the pastoral, we must try to determine the characteristics of the idyll. The term

idyll (*εἰδύλλιον* = a little picture) was given to the poems of Theocritus not by himself but by scholiasts and applies to the pictures of Hercules and of the Dioscuri, the heroes, as well as to the pictures of Daphnis and Menalcas, the herdsmen. In classical usage the terms idyll and pastoral were not confounded, for the odes of Pindar were called idylls while the idylls of Ausonius have no pastoral element. Among the moderns usage has varied. The French seem to regard the idyll as distinctly pastoral; among the Spanish the idyll conveys no idea of a pastoral poem, which is usually called an eclogue; the Italians hold a middle view, permitting the idyll to take a wide range without restricting it to pastoral. Our modern English attitude in the matter may give determining weight. Recently we have had many idylls in prose, — *Wabash Idylls*, *Quaker Idylls*, and *Auld Licht Idylls*, while in poetry there are the *English Idylls* of Tennyson, the *Dramatic Idylls* of Robert Browning, and the *Old World Idylls* of Austin Dobson, all without pastoral association. The situation is summed up well in Chambers's Encyclopædia: "Idyll; a term used to denote a species of poem representing the simple scenes of pastoral life. It is, however, an error to suppose that the idyll is exclusively pastoral; . . . After the use made of the word by Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*, which are epic in their style and treatment, and romantic and tragic in their incidents, it becomes very difficult to say what may not be called an idyll."

The idyll does indeed defy definition. It is known by the mood that it wakens. Books such as *Prue and I*, *The Bracebridge Hall Stories*, *Paul and Virginia*, and *The Cotter's Saturday Night* are idylls; they throw one into a mild state of peace and content, rousing only those sentiments which are tranquil. General usage seems to imply that the idyll is a brief poem or story where some simple sort of happiness is

dramatically presented, where no tragic elements enter. Idyllic means free from dissatisfaction. The idyll calls for no great endeavor, no lofty motives, no self-searching and discipline. It is the only sort of writing whose end is to make us enamored of life. In it we have always a charmed atmosphere, some suggestion of satisfying happiness. An idyll is a picture of life as the human spirit wishes it to be, a presentation of the chosen moments of earthly content.

The idyll, when limited to the pastoral atmosphere, has certain characteristic elements which differentiate it from other closely allied forms, — the elegy, the eclogue, and the song. Theocritus perfected the pastoral idyll in three forms, all more or less dramatic, and these have persisted down to the present time: the monologue, in which the despairing lover is pictured singing his song of complaint; the dialogue, in which two or more shepherds sing without having any fixed subjects; and the dialogue with a singing-match. Here one shepherd, meeting another, challenges him to a song contest; wagers are laid, — a kid staked against a lamb or, perhaps, a drinking-cup, — the umpire is appointed, a sequestered spot is chosen, and the songs are sung, with their lyric reference to the beloved maidens, to the happiness of shepherd life, or to the beauty of the world about. There is appeal to the emotions and to every sense. Such passages as the following show the appeal to the eye and the ear as well as to the other three senses.

“*Comatas*. . . . ‘Here be oak trees, and here the galingale, and sweetly here hum the bees about the hives. There are two wells of chill water, and on the tree the birds are warbling, and the shadow is beyond compare with that where thou liest, and from on high the pine tree pelts us with her cones.’

*Lacon*. ‘Nay, but lambs’ wool, truly, and fleeces, shalt thou tread here, if thou wilt but come, — fleeces more soft than sleep, . . . And I will set a great bowl of white milk for the nymphs, and another will I offer of sweet olive oil.’” — Lang’s Translation.

Characteristic also is the lover's recital of the gifts he may give his fair one,—fleeces and flowers, stores of cheese and wine and honeycomb which not even the nectar and ambrosia of the Immortals can surpass.

The elegy may be distinguished at once by its consistent relation to the sadder experiences of life. Once purely reflective, it has come to mean at the present time a poem of lamentation and of grief. *Lycidas* shows the pastoral elegy in English perfection.

Many attempts, especially among the French, have been made to distinguish the idyll from the eclogue, but no satisfying conclusion has been reached, in spite of much subtle discussion turning on the less important aspects of both poems. As the term idyll was applied to the works of Theocritus, so the term eclogue (Greek *ἐκλογή* = a selection) was given by scholars to the shorter poems of Virgil which deal with pastoral life. Eclogue has been identified with pastoral even more persistently than idyll has been identified with pastoral, it has been the favorite and constant term down to the twentieth century for any sort of rustic dialogue. It may be asked, then, why not use the term eclogue instead of the circumlocution, pastoral idyll?

The idylls of Theocritus, with their fresh and visible beauty, served later as models for Latin Virgil, who copied Theocritus with a freedom which might have another name. He has given us the idylls in a debased form, in which strict artistic unity is violated. Veiled references to historical conditions, personal gratitude, eulogy, in the Virgilian pastorals, detract from high artistic merit, and make the poems of dual interest and of dual purpose. Virgil's eclogues are like those old Roman mosaics representing a scene in Paradise, where in one corner is the prostrate figure of the donor. In later literature we find eclogues following the Virgilian model, eclogues where

various subjects are treated under pastoral guise. There are allegories, political, social, theological ; there are panegyrics of princes and of poets ; there are satires and invectives, all in the form of pastoral eclogues, with pastoral names, and pastoral imagery.

But even eclogue does not always mean pastoral. In English literature, especially in the age of Pope, there are many eclogues that have no relation to the pastoral, yet are, however, always dialogues, — *A Culinary Eclogue* by Shenstone ; *The Magi*, a sacred eclogue by William Thompson ; *The Ghaists*, a kirk-yard eclogue by Robert Ferguson ; *The Dean and the Squire*, a political eclogue by Mason ; *Town Eclogues*, by Gay ; *Fire, Famine, and Slaughtering*, a war eclogue by Coleridge, and finally an absurd parody of the Virgilian eclogue by Mrs. Barbauld, *A School Eclogue*, which is the old singing match performed by two school boys, who lay wagers, while a third school boy acts as umpire. Eclogue has always the significance of dialogue, but not necessarily that of pastoral. The eclogue, then, is often vitiated by the presence of ulterior meanings, and as an art form is inferior to the idyll, which never seeks to be didactic nor satirical, but is always a genuine artistic creation.

It is necessary to distinguish carefully in the pastoral the idyllic monologue from the song. Briefly speaking, the distinguishing mark of the idyll is its descriptive quality. In the song there is description only as it comes in incidentally, in the monologue there is usually a prefatory description of the place and of the singer. In the song

“Come live with me and be my love,”

there is invocation, apostrophe, spoken entirely by the shepherd, while in the January pastoral of Spenser, which resembles most closely this pastoral song, the scene is described at the length of two stanzas. A pastoral idyll may be



said to begin always with some introductory words describing the place and circumstance of the song, while the real pastoral song is an apostrophe from the very start, never in any case presenting a picture of the singer as he sings.

Finally there is a distinction between the pastoral idyll, which is a particular picture of a particular scene, and the sort of poem which is a general description of a general state of things. Such a generalized description is Thomas Campion's *Jack and Joan*, which is not strictly pastoral :

“ Jack and Joan, they think no ill,  
But loving live, and merry still ;  
Do their week day's work, and pray  
Devoutly on the holy day :  
Skip and trip it on the green,  
And help to chose the Summer Queen ;  
Lash out at a country feast  
Their silver penny with the best.”

Closely allied to this is the general description of idyllic content, which is not dramatic, but philosophical, and discusses those elements which make pastoral life sweet. Such is the bit from *The Purple Island* of Phineas Fletcher, Canto XII :

“ Thrice, O, thrice happy shepherd's life and state !  
When courts are happiness' unhappy pawns !  
His cottage low, and safely humble gate  
Shuts out proud fortune and her scorns and fawns ;  
No feared treason breaks his quiet sleep ;  
Singing all day, his flocks he learns to keep,  
Himself as innocent as are his simple sheep.”

It has been said that the pastoral idyll is in poetry what the Netherlandish *genre* pictures are in painting. The elements which make the *genre* pictures of Teniers, Jan Steen, or Brouwer are a study of certain moments of relaxation in busy lives, festivity, play, entertainment. The delights are social, joy in mere motion of the dance, enjoyment of

tobacco, ale, and kisses, and are exquisitely rendered to the most minute detail, intensely actual and visible. In the idylls of Theocritus, which fulfil the ideal conditions of the pastoral idyll, there is the same insistence of detail, the same scrupulous rendering of the most trifling matter, the same reality; there is the vivid presence of the purple grape, the green olive, the scent of grass and thyme, the cheese and honey, the touch of the cool breeze, and the sound of doves and of running water. Though both possess fineness of execution, the work of Theocritus is more subtle than that of the *genre* painters. They present realistic and incidental scenes with none of his striving for artistic grouping, nor of his endeavor to immortalize beauty. Theocritus chooses the most picturesque and most ideally characteristic moments. The sense of joy in him rises infinitely beyond mere social merriment; it is complex, and has a spiritual element which is undulled perception of natural beauty.

A pastoral idyll is a dramatic presentation of some characteristic scene in the joyous life of herdsmen. It is dramatic in that it represents the movement and the speech of the actors *in propria persona*, but it has neither the action nor the unity of movement necessary to true drama. The subject appeals to the eye and to the ear, not to the intellect and the will; the emphasis is placed, not upon event and circumstance, but upon emotion and appreciation. The descriptions of nature, the stories of love, the delight in songs inconsequent and intensely emotional are all part of a lyric mood. Clearista pelting the goatherd with apples and the love song of Polyphemus are not drama. Moreover, the actors lack characterization. Each one must possess conventional traits: he must be sensitive to the beauty of the world, he must have ardent affections, he must feel a certain comradeship with his herd, and, most of all, he must have the supreme gift of song. Uniting in composite fashion the elements of two generic

divisions, the pastoral idyll cannot be placed in one category or the other, but must be defined, in general, as lyric in intention and dramatic in execution.

The pastoral idyll is brief, slight, but haunting. It has an immortality that does not need justification nor persuasive exposition, for it catches at some eternal yearning in the heart of man, and gives him for a moment the picture of content. And as in tragedy we are purified by sympathy and awe, so in the pastoral idyll we are purified by sympathy and joy. We desire the same tranquil delight, the same passion of love, the same freedom from strain and envy and ambition that we see in the pastoral idyll. This form of poetry appeals to a feeling that is keen and permanent in the human spirit; and, although it is no cry to arms, and may not rouse deep spiritual struggle or produce higher and loftier ideals of human conduct, it does effect again that ever-necessary reconciliation of man with the simplicity of his own being.

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